

Knighting Bert Mackenzie King and Ottawa's Galahad Statue

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Article abstract

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Knighting Bert

MACKENZIE KING AND OTTAWA'S GALAHAD STATUE

by Dennis Duffy

One of our history's minor ironies is that Mackenzie King, whose government played a major role in barring Canadian citizens from accepting British honours, nonetheless helped confer a symbolic knighthood on his dearest friend and roommate, Henry Albert "Bert" Harper. Bert Harper's heroic death in December of 1901 occasioned a search for a memorial which would "take the form of a figure symbolical of heroism and nobility of character, such as might be suggested by the figure of 'Sir Galahad,' in the famous painting ... by the late George Frederick Watts, R.A."¹ (King 1906 11-12).

Watts' image of what Harper called his "ideal knight" hung over Bert's desk in the apartment that he shared with "Rex," as King's intimates called him. Rex and Bert were more than roommates. They were soulmates as well in a sublimated relationship that, as C.P. Stacey has

¹ William Lyon Mackenzie King, *The Secret of Heroism. A Memoir of Henry Albert Harper* (London and Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1906), 11-12.



*Sir Galahad statue, Parliament Hill, Ottawa.
Modified from an original photo by D. Gordon Robertson.*

Abstract

*Mackenzie King's successful efforts to erect a statue in memory of Bert Harper's heroic, self-sacrificing rescue of a drowning girl is rich in cultural and political implications. The Sir Galahad statue abutting Parliament Hill was King's first melding of personal concerns with public commemoration. That foray into controlling public memory through public sculpture and construction was followed by grander ones: Kingsmere; the Pioneer Arch (Niagara Falls, demolished); and the William Lyon Mackenzie memorial (Queens Park, Toronto). King's Diary and relevant documents in Library and Archives Canada lay bare the ways in which the junior member of Cabinet and self-appointed chief mourner—in addition to authoring a printed hagiography (*The Secret of Heroism*)—engineered a bronze testimonial to his grief, and a memorial to an heroic civil servant.*

Résumé: *Nous examinons ici la campagne menée par Mackenzie King pour faire ériger un monument à la mémoire de Bert Harper, son ami intime et assistant au ministère du travail, qui avait perdu la vie en tentant de sauver une jeune fille qui se noyait. La statue du chevalier Galahad, située près des édifices parlementaires, est un monument riche en implications culturelles et politiques, qui reflète à la fois les sentiments personnels de King et son désir de commémoration publique. Ce même mélange allait inspirer d'autres oeuvres encore plus grandioses: Kingsmere; l'arche des pionniers à Niagara Falls (aujourd'hui démolie); le monument William Lyon Mackenzie à Queen's Park, Toronto. Le journal intime de King ainsi que des documents des archives fédérales nous permettent de voir comment, tout en écrivant une hagiographie, "The Secret of Heroism", il a fait ériger ce témoignage en bronze de l'héroïsme d'un fonctionnaire et de son propre chagrin.*

pointed out, was far more “Tennysonian” than “Wildean” in nature.² Whatever form that love may have taken, it seems certain that King loved Bert Harper as he loved no other man. He did not scruple to compare their love with that of Christ for his followers: “My heart cannot express the love it has for you and we have nothing in human thought to express the love which He has for us both.”³

Overblown as Rex's rhetoric may have been, its very excess expresses how great was the loss that Bert's untimely death thrust upon him. His diary indicates King's gratification at the depth of affection on Bert's part—“the dear boy has many words of love for me”—though this could not have come as a surprise.⁴ Initially, as is often the case with grieving, reading such a testimony likely height-

² C.P. Stacey, *A Very Double Life. The Private World of Mackenzie King*. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976), 79. Stacey also adds the commonsensical point that anyone as cautious as King would not have published in the tender missives from Harper that he did, had he feared any interpretation questioning their “innocence” (81). A later age however, could choose to read them otherwise.

³ Henry Albert Harper Fonds, Library Archives Canada, MG30-A28, R1580-0-1-E, King to Harper, Dec. 15, 1896.

⁴ Mackenzie King Diaries, Library Archives Canada, March 4, 1902.



Mackenzie King. Credit: Library and Archives Canada/PA-028136.

ened the pain of loss. Their relationship had taken the form of hero and sidekick, with Rex in the leading role, a pattern that seems to have suited both. Old friends from their Varsity days, their paths had diverged, as is common in such palships. They nonetheless maintained a closeness unusual under such circumstances, and their paths crossed again in Ottawa. Bert had gone into journalism after some false starts elsewhere, yet he was now a new member of the Ottawa press gallery when their proximity returned. King on the other hand had become a rapidly rising politico, protégé of Sir Wilfrid Laurier and bearer of a newly-minted Cabinet portfolio (Labour) that it was up to King to transform into a significant Ministry. In need of a safe and unambitious subordinate: King plucked Harper from

the press gallery and made him in effect his press officer and general assistant. Yet the relationship did not fade under office pressure.

King was away on Ministry business, Harper holding the fort in Ottawa, but Bert's sudden death while attempting to rescue a drowning woman proved a far greater affliction than that occasioned by the loss of a trusted sidekick. The pair of them had known each other's families, they had been two highly eligible bachelors in what was then a very small political town. And they had their high-minded dreams of somehow bringing Christ and Galahad to Ottawa. That may appear now like searching for the Grail at a Tupperware party; the rest of this article will try to demonstrate that such a quest and the kind of rhetoric that it entailed would not have seemed absurd to the official culture of their time and place. Everyone in Ottawa knew of the friendship, some may even have wondered just how eligible these two particular bachelors may have been. The fact remained that for Rex, any memorial that Bert's heroic death occasioned would need to enshrine three aspects of the deceased: his role as a friend, his role as a trusted public servant, his role as a paragon of personal virtue. Could any piece of public sculpture bear that volume of significance?

In fact, the chosen sculpture did not. King chose to supplement his major role in the monument's creation with the authorship of a hagiographic memoir of Harper, *The Secret of Heroism*, whose

similarity in message and execution I discuss below. What happens here results in a sculptured image of a painterly ideal knight that in turn yields to the printed version of the ideal knight. That is, Galahad and King's quest for an expression of it (because the mythic figure has long since devolved into an image) presents a reflexive succession of mirror images. These in turn display the world that Mackenzie King's moral sensibility created, and we shall discover how similar idealizing impulses drove his subsequent involvement in the creation of public art. Such representative objects as Kingsmere's faux ruins, the Niagara Pioneer Arch and Toronto's William Lyon Mackenzie Memorial are branches on a tree rooted in Galahad.

That monument standing where Metcalfe Street ends at Wellington is about more than grief and memorialization. Ambition and self-empowerment played their role in its creation. Ottawa's mythical knight opens what we can understand now as a continuing cycle of testimonies to King's mastery of fusing personal obsessions with the political ones involved in the creation of public memory. Finally, King's role in the production of Galahad conveys in concentrated form his outlook on history and how it is made.

Understanding this outlook and the rampant idealism that it entailed, assured that the objects created through King's cultural enterprises rest firmly in mid-

air. There they function as conveyances more of idealized concepts rather than as imaginative representations of historical actualities. Assume for a moment that repressed sexuality lay at the root of what we shall see as Bert Harper's idealization. The fact remains that the end product of King's love for Harper does not differ radically from the end product of other historical figures that he memorialized. A common force drives that sculptural procession that Galahad begins. King's tenacious, intuitive hold on the aspirations and drives of his electorate helps to explain his lengthy retention of supreme political power. We shall see that his interventions into public art models a dovetailing of King's inner drives with the forces defining the culture of Anglophone Canada in his time. The implications of Mackenzie King's knighting of Bert Harper ultimately explain how precisely King's interventions into the structures of public memory suited a national culture which he both reflected and reinforced.

II

The Galahad monument answered the yearnings of a public in search more of models than of instances of public heroism. King channeled these drives through two media: the bronze structure of the statue, and the printed page of the memoir that appeared a year after the monument's dedication.⁵

⁵ Much of what follows concerning the origins and circumstances surrounding the Harper monument relies upon the earlier work of the late Dr. Terry G. Guernsey. I have benefited from her exposition of the monument and its creation in *Statues of Parliament Hill: an illustrated history*. Ottawa-Hull: Visual Arts Programme, National Capital Commission, 1986. More importantly, her papers in the National Gallery of Canada contain meticulously organized material relevant to the subject, including photocopies of

Within twelve days of Bert Harper's death of 6 December 1901, one Mr. Morrell had preached a sermon upon the incident. Harper died while attempting to rescue Bessie Blair from the Ottawa river. She had fallen through thin ice during a skating party they had both attended. Mackenzie King kept the typescript of the sermon.⁶ Its title: "The Alabaster Box Broken." Its text: Mark 14:4. That is, Harper's name does not appear in the sermon's title. The text features a woman (Mary Magdalene) rather than a man. It tells



Bert Harper, ca. 1900: credit: Lancefield Studio / Library and Archives Canada / PA-126941.

of the fallen woman's extravagant gesture in anointing Jesus' feet with costly ointment, and in homiletic fashion, that scriptural incident is applied to Harper's moral extravagance in proffering so noble and foredoomed a gesture. Both Mr. Morrell and Mackenzie King in his later account of Harper's death chose to ignore any hint of indecision on their hero's

part. What could be seen as Harper's anguished reply to a friend's warning about the hopelessness of the task—"What else can I do!"—turns into a triumphant assertion of single-mindedness.⁷ King—who was far from Ottawa at the time—chose to conclude the printed transcription that he had assembled of Harper's last words with an exclamation point rather than a question mark. No hint of doubt or indecision, no hint of "Why me?" was to sully Harper's act. In language characteristic of a sermon, the Agony

in the Garden has been purged from the exemplary moral that the homilist has chosen to draw. Yet King's own account of events—sembled from others' memories—in fact depicts a less reckless would-be lifesaver.

Having sent the young lady with whom he was skating ... for help, [Harper] ... lay prone upon the ice, close to the edge, and extend-

Mackenzie King's correspondence and press clippings. Consulting these materials saved me many hours in the library, and I am grateful for her generous bequest to a research community that followed her. I am also indebted to Dr. Cindi Campbell of the National Gallery for her aid in accessing these papers.

⁶ Library Archives Canada, Mackenzie King papers, MG26, J1, vol. 4, 4607.

⁷ Mackenzie King 1906, 11.

ing his walking stick, endeavoured to put it within reach of those in the water. Finding the distance too great, and hearing Miss Blair assuring her companion that she could swim alone, [and] for each to make a single attempt lest they should go down together, and seeing that he was striving in vain to save her, Harper regained his feet, pulled off his coat and gauntlets, and prepared to risk his life in an endeavour to effect a rescue.⁸

This seems an heroic struggle marked by common sense and thoughtful prudence. “What else can I do!” seems an admission that, all sensible alternatives having been tried, only the heroic one remains. This brings before us a humanitarian more human and credible than the heroic model that the bronze Galahad portrays.

That bronze knight displays no mark of the understandable doubt, hesitation and fear, of the human flaws that might disfigure a mythic hero. By the time that the memorial committee began its negotiations with the sculptor whom it had picked, Mackenzie King had become its Secretary. Despite his initial demurral of any leading role in the enterprise, King inevitably, perhaps deliberately, became the monument’s great shaper.⁹

None of the committee’s other powerful men occupied the unstated “chief mourner” role that was King’s. None else put in the time that he had, and for sculp-

tor Ernest Wise Keyser, King became in effect his patron for this commission. That exacting patron took issue with the wrinkled brow that Keyser impressed upon an early model. The artist explained that he had sought to convey

a nobility, a manly courage, and the desire to *do* with absolute dis-regard [sic.] of self. My idea was further, not to portray a brave, but reckless boy but a man of about Mr. Harper’s age, who, while no less brave fully appreciated the meaning of suffering and sacrifice, with no fear for consequences, as is exemplified in his words: ‘What else can I do?’¹⁰

Keyser’s note in effect inserts a question mark at the end of the sentence that King concluded with an exclamation point. The patron wanted none of that.

King’s instead emphasized that the committee (in fact, Mackenzie King) sought an allegory. Molding such a figure necessitated the erasure of any stylistic touch “representative in any way of a particular individual, or of a particular incident.” Under such a convention, the statue’s face had to show an attitude “unconscious, rather than a conscious moment to a person of [Galahad’s] type. There is a preparedness for any kind of heroic work, but no suggestion of a particular deed.” Then appeared the capstone to King’s response: “It was this [idealization] which made the wrinkled forehead,

⁸ Mackenzie King, 1906, 10-11.

⁹ King’s Diary takes issue with an editorial penned by his father mentioning his role: “the quotation is well enough but I regret that there has been mention of its being made to me. I am sensitive on personal mentions of this kind, and I dislike them. Why should one seek gain from the loss of one’s dearest friend? It is cruel that is all” (Diary, 2 Jan. 1902). By 1904, however, he had stepped into the limelight, identifying himself to sculptor Keyser, “as one, who, perhaps more than any other member, is particularly interested in the monument being all that we wish it to be” (King to Keyser, 30 November 1904; King Papers 3330).

¹⁰ Keyser to Harper Memorial Committee, 23 August 1904; Mackenzie King papers 3324; italics in original).

instead of the calm brow, particularly inappropriate....”¹¹ If we marvel at King’s imposition of an angelic, emotionless attitude upon a memorial purportedly commemorating a human exploit, then we have not read the script that King worked from.

A feature of Rex and Bert’s intimacies had been a thorough immersion in the lengthy Victorian epic that they had often read aloud to each other, Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. To Rex, the poem’s chief power lodged in its moral agenda. The *Idylls* “excel in their beauty and strength of their moral teaching.”¹² What these prim colonial boys saw as the epic’s principal virtue, had in fact repelled some metropolitan critics. The *Idylls* appeared in parts from 1856 to 1885, and as early as 1877 poet and critic A.C. Swinburne questioned Tennyson’s arraignment of adultery as the primal moral flaw that drove the tragedy inherent in the Arthurian cycle of myths. Such a domestic moralization seemed to him to diminished the story’s power. Replacing the legendary account of Arthur’s unknowing coupling with his half-sister

Morgause that had produced Mordred (whose revolt in turn would destroy Camelot), with a commonplace domestic infidelity (Lancelot and Guinevere’s adultery) reduced tragedy to divorce-court proceeding.¹³ It was that quintessentially Victorian reading of the tragedy at the heart of Arthurian legends that so suited King and Harper; their vision of Camelot foregrounded the glorified, ringletted, armoured boy who crowned Watts’ painting. In Tennyson a seraphic figure lacking in psychological depth and emotional complexity, Galahad served in fact as the immunized carrier of an infection fatal to lesser mortals. His successful quest for the Grail, a pursuit appropriate to someone as morally pure and inhumanly serene as he, distracts his Round Table companions from their proper, mundane duties. The knights’ dispersal as they seek the unattainable helps bring about Camelot’s decline. So disillusioned a reading of Galahad—common in our own time, but nonetheless also appearing in some of the critical discourse of King and Harper’s own era—could never have suited Rex and Bert.¹⁴ Despite Tennyson’s

¹¹ King to Keyser, November 30, 1904; King papers, 3330-31.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3332.

¹³ A.C. Swinburne, “A.C. Swinburne on the *Idylls*.” *Under the Microscope* (1877). Quoted in *Tennyson: the Critical Heritage*. Ed. John D. Jump. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967. 318-21.

¹⁴ For the current reading of Galahad’s Grail quest, see William E. Buckler, *Man and His Myths. Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King” in Critical Context* (New York: New York University Press, 1984); J. Philip Eggers’ *King Arthur’s Laureate. A Study of Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King”* (New York: New York University Press, 1971); F.E.L. Priestley, *Language and Structure in Tennyson’s Poetry* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1973); John D. Rosenberg, *The Fall of Camelot. A Study of Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King”* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1973), and Clyde deL. Ryals, *From the Great Deep. Essays on “Idylls of the King”* ([Columbus], Ohio University Press, 1967). Yet similar readings occur during King’s era. John Franklin Genung, *The Idylls and the Ages. A Valuation of Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King.”* (New York: Crowell, 1907); Harold Littledale, *Essays on Lord Tennyson’s Idylls of the King* (London: Macmillan, 1893), and M.W. MacCallum, *Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King” and Arthurian Story from the XVI Century* (Glasgow: James Maclehose,

own warnings against any over-allegorizing of the poem—"They have taken my hobby, and ridden it too hard, and would have explained some things too allegorically, although there is an allegorical or perhaps rather a parabolic drift in the poem"¹⁵—our two high-minded young men in Ottawa would have viewed Galahad's other-worldliness as a consummation devoutly to be sought, a role model for the traits they sought to cultivate throughout public life. In Ottawa. If all of this now seems at once jejune, pompous and even dangerous in its misreading of human motivation, it was a habit of mind diligently fostered in the Canada of William Lyon Mackenzie King and Henry Albert Harper, at that time and later. Some attention must now be paid to the idealist atmosphere in which two such young Canadians could luxuriate.

III

Our discussion of this idealizing drive begins with King's other Harper monument *The Secret of Heroism*. The memoir's very title epitomizes the habitual disposition of a public figure as secretive (except to his Diary) as Mackenzie King. In fact, no astounding and

arcane truth emerges from this account. Heroism's secret appears to lie in the fact that heroism can mark the life of a figure apparently as colourless and seemingly unheroic as Bert Harper. But there are secrets in the text itself, aspects of Harper's life obscured through vague allusion that leave a reader surprised at Harper's heroism, however noble his death.

Our surprise lies not in King's relentless inflation of Harper's achievements. Such are the givens of a personal memoir. Our perplexity stems instead from the degree of this inflation and the absence of detail in any exposition of its basis. A later caller on the Minister of Labour (he probably did not get a "yes" to his request) opined that while Harper might have been a fine man, he certainly was not worth much as an editor of the ministry's *Labour Gazette*.¹⁶ Certainly the literary materials preserved in the Harper fonds—whether official, public or private in nature—never in their tone or liveliness move beyond the earnestly commonplace. A contribution on "Colleges and Citizenship" to the Christmas number of a college magazine, his writings in the *Gazette*, his letters on his and Canada's aspirations to a higher version

1894) testify to the fact that a critical climate did exist underscoring the role that the Grail quest played in Camelot's fall. What Gerard Manley Hopkins viewed as "quite a fantastic charade-playing trumpery Galahad, merely playing the fool over Christian heroism" would not have played well in turn-of-the-century Ottawa. There the reading of one of King's Liberal idols, William Ewart Gladstone—who viewed the strength of Tennyson's Arthurian material as originating in its supernatural overtones—would have prevailed: See Gerard Manley Hopkins, "G.M. Hopkins on the Idylls," from a letter to Richard Watson Dixon 27 Feb. 1879. Quoted in *Tennyson: the Critical Heritage*, 334-335; W.E. Gladstone, "W.E. Gladstone on *The Idylls of the King* [1859] and Earlier Works," *Quarterly Review* 106 (October 1859). Quoted in *Tennyson: the Critical Heritage*, 454-85.

¹⁵ Hallam Tennyson, . *Alfred Lord Tennyson. A Memoir*. II. (New York: Macmillan, 1897), 126-27.

¹⁶ Mackenzie King diary, 9 January 1906. For the Diary: <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/king/index-e.html>

of public life—"I sincerely trust that the power of righteousness is real among men and that your prophecy may be fulfilled"¹⁷—bear out this impression of well-meaning, high-minded banality in thought and expression. Harper's statements seem like an amalgam of the generalities common to award ceremonies. But then, so does King's account of Harper's early years read like a testimonial. What perplexes a reader is the absence of any detailed commentary or analysis about the doubts and self-questionings afflicting anyone whose career aspirations are not instantly fulfilled. What happens to the rest of us as we puzzle out what we want to do with our lives barely touches Bert Harper, at least as Mackenzie King portrays him. An astute analyst of Mackenzie King's inner life underlines his penchant for "intimacy based on distance."¹⁸ An emotional and narrative distance also marks portions of King's memoir of Harper, as if he were a clergyman trapped into eulogizing someone he never really knew.

Unable to self-fund a professional education, the Harper of *The Secret of Heroism* "engaged temporarily in agency work which was not to his liking, and towards which from the start he had not entertained any serious intentions He then "found much that tried his patience severely, and at times caused him to experience periods of the most genuine depression." Unable to find steady work—we must ourselves infer—Harper pursued

work on an M.A. for the intervening year and a half, a time "to be remembered as [one] of adversity rather than as of advance" (38-39). In fact, the letters of Harper which included in King's memoir speak of "an unsettled frame of mind which cannot be healthy" (41). They allude to what had to have been a wretched period of selling insurance and to "fatal traces of repeated disappointments" (42-43). Those details, such as they are, Harper's letters supply. His depression and frustration call forth no response from King beyond the statement that they illumine "a testing time," a period "which served to prove the man" (39). It may be foolish on my part to find fault with another age's reticence about matters that now obsess our own period of memoir-writing. Yet the fact remains that whether as friend, author or historian, King cannot approach very closely the details that would humanize his lost friend and place his stressed humanity before a reading public. What kinds of nastiness did Harper encounter that made him aware of "the mean dishonest methods which are so generally adopted by some of our so-called successful men"? (43). King's memoir stops short of smoothing out the actual equivalent of the furrow in Harper's brow that he felt disfigured the artist's model for the statue, but he chooses to avoid lingering upon it, or thickening his description of the actual circumstances darkening Harper's life at this point. Everything is subordinated to an account

¹⁷ Harper to King, 6 November 1901. Henry Albert Harper fonds, Library Archives Canada.

¹⁸ Joy E. Esbrey, *Knight of the Holy Spirit. A Study of William Lyon Mackenzie King* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 61.

of serene martyrdom.

In a similar way, Harper's frantic leapfrogging in search of steady work—from a few weeks in 1897 at a temporary job at the London *Advertiser*, to a steadier few months at the same town's *News*, to an October 1897 berth at Toronto's *Mail and Empire* to a time as the Ottawa correspondent with the Montreal *Herald* in 1897—King records as a kind of steady course which culminates in Harper's commencing "to help at least to shape and direct public opinion in matters of national concern" (48). Leaving aside the question of the accuracy of so inflated a description of a reporter's slot in the Parliamentary press gallery, King's account steers away from any genuine absorption in his subject's life. He prefers instead to elide details about Harper's life into a disquisition of his life's import, as the author conceives it. The omission of such details transforms Harper's heroism into a succession of secret, unnoticed events magically culminating in his self-sacrifice.

Tennyson's Galahad, in line with his epic's quest to link the Arthurian with the Christianity of his own day, spoke in Christ-like apothegms: "If I lose my life, I find it," an echo of Jesus' enigmatic "He that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."¹⁹ Rather than allowing Harper to repeat his own last words upon the statue's base, King had the words of Tennyson inscribed there. The sainthood that he had imposed upon his late roommate had no

room for prosaic questioning or detailed recounting, not even for the subject's own words.

Which of course the public culture in which Mackenzie King functioned at the century's turn relished and applauded. Thus the metropolitan centre of empire found in Harper's life a confirmation of its own success and continuance: "If Canada has many young men of the stamp of the subject of this Memoir, then indeed the greatness of her destiny is assured."²⁰ Pleased with his accomplishments as a hagiographer, King gathered into a pamphlet all the favourable reviews of his memoir; they endorsed Mackenzie King's apotheosis of Bert Harper's into an ideal hero for his time. The age demanded an image, and Mackenzie King successfully put forward that of his one true knight.

So pressing a demand made its impact felt everywhere. For example, Sarah Jeanette Duncan's *The Imperialist*, a novel about the political disillusionment of her hero Lorne Murchison, first appeared in hardback publication in 1904. A visit to London and the defeat of his electoral cause at home teach her eponymous hero Lorne Murchison how vaporous are the prospects for Imperial Federation. Duncan's strengths as a social novelist lie in her clear-eyed deflation of the idealistic rhetoric of federationists of all stripes, her certain grasp of the hard-headed realities of the Scots-Canadian business class that melds with her detailed descriptions

¹⁹ Alfred Tennyson, "The Holy Grail," *Idylls of the King*. <http://www.online-literature.com/tennyson/idylls-of-the-king/9/>, line 178. Jesus: Matthew 10, 39.

²⁰ [Anon.] "The Secret of Heroism," *The Spectator*, 31 March 1906, 498.

of contemporary Upper Canadian daily life. How sharply her perceptions clash with the quaint, romantic portrayals of Canadian colonial history propelling the historical romances of her contemporary Gilbert Parker into public esteem and burgeoning sales. Yet the appeal of an elevated and distant perspective ultimately proved irresistible even to Duncan, furnishing her with the imagery to round off an inconclusive ending with a fanfare of consolatory sentiment:

Here, for Lorne and for his country, we lose
the thread of destiny. The shuttles fly, weaving
the will of the nations, with a skein for
ever dipped again; and he goes forth to his
share in the task among those by whose hand
and direction the pattern and the colours
will be made.²¹

Galahad emerged in bronze and Bert Harper in print during a time when facts seemed an endangered species in Canadian national discourse. Charles G.D. Roberts' "Tantramar Revisited" set out the boundaries for this approach in 1893. For this deft variation on the Romantic crisis lyric wrenches the vista beheld by the nerve-exhausted speaker from any threatening contact with actuality. From his distant perspective, the speaker evokes an ecology in which land-and-sea have interpenetrated and melded:

Well I remember the piles of blocks and
ropes, and the net-reels
Wound with the beaded nets, dripping and
dark from the sea!

Now at this season the nets are unwound;
they hang from the rafters
Over the fresh-stowed hay in upland barns,
and the wind
Blows all day through the chinks, with the
streaks of sunlight, and sways them
Softly at will; or they lie heaped in the gloom
of a loft

Yet the speaker deliberately refuses to thrust himself into so healing a setting, realizing that any close-up of the scene must destroy the timelessness that his vision has imposed upon it.

Yet will I stay my steps and not go down to
the marshland,
Muse and recall far off, rather remember
than see,
Lest on too close sight I miss the darling il-
lusion,
Spy at their task even here the hands of
chance and change²²

Roberts' speaker wills his avoidance of actual fact. Mackenzie King's memoir of his friend illustrates a similar habit of mind. Nothing was ever quite what it appeared to be, but lay instead awaiting its transformation by the intent observer. We are talking of an era in Canada's national discourse that not only marked the turn-of-the-century, but that endured even beyond the Great War. How else could Mackenzie King have stood before the House of Commons and spoken of Vimy Ridge as a "one of the world's great altars" rather than as the trench-scarred, shell-pocked battleground that it had in fact been?²³ How else could Walter

²¹ Sarah Jeanette Duncan, *The Imperialist*. 1904. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/5/3/0/5301/5301.txt>>

²² Roberts, Sir Charles G.D. "Tantramar Revisited" <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/1726.html>, 31-36, 60-64.

²³ Canada, House of Commons Debates, 30 June 1928, 4431.

Statue of the Spirit of Sacrifice at The Canadian National Vimy Memorial. Photo by Joe Anderson 11 July 2008

S. Allward's grandiose Vimy memorial have sought to console the grieving by sculpting a classically nude male in an extended, stressed position as if crucified (but upon a missing cross), to the exclusion of any figure remotely resembling a dead soldier?

Contrary to any assumption about a post-war mood of disillusion, the Great War's aftermath did not quickly smother this habit of mind, especially where the discourse on the nation's nature and destiny is concerned. In fact, Canada's war record could even reinforce this tendency. Thus popular historian Stewart Wallace's *The Growth of Canadian National Feeling* proclaimed in 1927 that "Canada has now not only achieved a national consciousness, but has won from the



rest of the world—not even excepting the United States—the recognition of this national consciousness.” Declaring what we might now call a battlefield nationalism, Wallace noted that, “However pacifists may lament the fact, there is no formula for the creation of nationalism so efficacious as a war such as this [1812], waged against outside aggression under heavy odds.” His study concludes by un-

derplaying nationalism's material bases: “a national feeling based, not on the factors of language, religion and geography, but on those of a common fatherland, a common history, a common allegiance, common political ideals, and common hopes for the future.”²⁴ Near War's end, literary entrepreneur John W. Garvin introduced his anthology of war poetry by soaring beyond the trenches:

²⁴ W. Stewart Wallace, *The Growth of Canadian National Feeling* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1927), 7, 14, 85.

Great poets are the seers and prophets of a nation—of the world. Their function is to interpret life and nature in terms of beauty and passion, and through imagination and inspiration, reveal the Infinite and the True.²⁵

As Holly Pike has shown, even the discourse about literary discourse that literary anthologies provided during the post-War period functioned as a variety of nationalist manifesto.²⁶ There, our critical rhetoric continued to define a nation in terms antithetical to any material concept of it. In 1924, Archibald MacMechan opened his influential *Head-Waters of Canadian Literature* with the assertion that the ideal was a characteristic Canadian cultural preoccupation—embodied in an idealized female figure—whose presence had made its way to the battlefield “[O]n the surface though Canada be prosaic and commonplace, there is deep down in the nation’s heart a capacity for the ideal. It was for an ideal that Canada poured out blood and treasure like water in the Great War. When Canadians figure their country to themselves, they call up ... the image of a woman, young and fair, with the flush of sunrise on her face.”²⁷ Logan and French’s *Highways of Canadian Literature* (with road rather than river as its metaphoric title) appeared the same year as Mac-

Mechan’s anthology. Defining Canada within the boundless geography of idealized rhetoric, the volume’s “Preliminary Survey” trumpets that “verse and prose rise to the dignity of literature when they express and promote existence,” and that the anthology’s synoptic approach “enables the critic or historian rightly to estimate the social and spiritual significance and value of Canadian authors [sic.] ideas on nature, Society, human Existence, and Endeavor. Within this framework tower “*Truth, beauty and splendor of ideas*—these are the three supreme excellences of the Canadian poetry written by the soldier-poets”²⁸

IV

Such a habit of national discourse demonstrates that the knighthood that Rex conferred upon Bert tapped into a source running even deeper than MacKenzie King’s personal idealizing currents. His distaste for the furrowed brow denoting perplexity, his serene avoidance of reality’s jagged edges was shared by a national culture. When Bert urged his sisters to read a bit of the *Idylls* daily as a tool for “tak[ing] one away from the sordidness of life” he spoke as a spiritual director rather than solely as a big brother. (*Secret of Heroism* 92). He too sought that unclouded brow. The Galahad stand-

²⁵ John W. Garvin, ed. *Canadian Poems of the Great War* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1918), 3.

²⁶ E. Holly Pike, “(Re)producing Canadian Literature: L.M. Montgomery’s Emily Novels.” *L.M. Montgomery and Canadian Culture*. Ed. Irene Gammel and Elizabeth Epperly (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 64.

²⁷ Archibald MacMechan, *Head-Waters of Canadian Literature*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1924), 4.

²⁸ J.D. Logan and Donald G. French. *Highways of Canadian Literature. A Synoptic Introduction to the Literary History of Canada (English) from 1760 to 1924* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1924), 16, 29, 344-45; emphasis in original.

ing on guard like some stone angel where Metcalf St. stops at Wellington gazes into a cultural ambience that the mythical figure himself would have found familiar, a culture itself in search of a Grail rather than seeking any self-definition with a material basis. When Mackenzie King and Bert Harper instinctively endorsed Galahad's Grail quest as *the* defining action of Tennyson's *Idylls*, their joint response was itself typically Canadian, a reflection of a national rhetorical practice. Two idealized nationalist statements that frame Mackenzie King's own memorializing efforts, one in 1889, the other in 1919 indicate how embedded was the habit of moralizing and transcendentalizing experience, even the experience of combat: "The poets whose songs fill this book are voices cheerful with the consciousness of young might, public wealth, and heroism. ... Canadians are, for the most part, the descendants of armies, officers and men, and every generation of them has stood up to battle."²⁹ A post-war proclamation appears less bellicose in tone: "[The new era] will be in one respect an era of ideas, an era of profound and general thought ... about the more important things—the

nature and purpose of life, the relation of man to his fellows and to his Creator, the meaning of the human race and its slow and painful but evident upward progress, the contribution of each nation and each individual to the sum total of the achievement of humanity."³⁰ Yet it too assumes a similarly elevated stance.

Why should two young men on the rise be carnivores amid a culture of vegetarians? Rex and Bert indulged to the fullest the craving for the airy that their culture had instilled in them. Disdaining to read for mere entertainment, they delighted in the earnest writings of Carlyle, Emerson, Matthew Arnold and Tennyson, paying no heed to the gap in sensibility and seriousness between these giants and a pop philosopher like Hamilton Wright Mabie (*Secret of Heroism* 67). So unflinching a gaze at the beyond was widely shared. Theosophy flourished then, its misty pronouncements permeating the country's artistic life.³¹ The conjunction of critical discourse with the artistic practice of one nationalist painter indicates how a religious ideology could resonate within a painter's *oeuvre*. Who can ignore the Christian belief at the

²⁹ William Dow Lighthall, Introduction. *Songs of the Great Dominion. Towards a Canadian Literature: Essays, Editorials and Manifestoes, Vol. 1, 1752-1940*. Ed. Douglas M. Daymond and Leslie G. Monkman (Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1984-85), 128.

³⁰ B.K. Sandwell, "The New Era." *Canadian Bookman* (January 1919), 174.

³¹ Lacombe, Michelle. "Theosophy and the Canadian Idealist Tradition." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 17:2 (1982), 100-18. As late as 1948, the eminent critic and literary theorist Northrop Frye was reading Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*, Theosophy's bible. Frye was at that time at work on W.B. Yeats' occultist *A Vision*. Dismissing the author as "a charlatan," Frye nonetheless placed Blavatsky's work among a number of texts able "to trigger the imagination to move beyond conventional ways of perception" [quoted in Robert D. Denham, *Northrop Frye. Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2004), 168-70; 317]. See also, Denham, "Northrop Frye's 'Kook Books' and the Esoteric Tradition," Jeffrey Donaldson and Alan Mendelson eds. *Frye and the Word. Religious Contexts in the Writings of Northrop Frye* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 328-56.

heart of painterly expression during Medieval and Renaissance eras? Yet the new revelation of Theosophy and the climate of idealism that it fostered among Canadian artists could come to define art as the search for an idealist representation of a mystical one-ness:

Canadian poetry is equally concerned [like painting] with the apocalyptic. The poetic mind, placed in the midst of natural grandeur, can scarcely avoid mysticism. It is not the sectarian mysticism of the Old World, steeped in religion and philosophy, but an instinctive pantheism, recognizing a spiritual meaning in nature and its identity with the soul of man³² (Stevenson 1924 207).

The first book about the Group of Seven, F.B. Housser's 1926 *A Canadian Art Movement. The Story of the Group of Seven* spent very little time on the material aspects of artistic production, audience response and eventual acceptance. From its early quotation of an Arthur Lismer article in the *Canadian Theosophist* of 1925, Housser's account of artistic genesis stakes its claim in the cloudlands of higher thought. "The modern Canadian so-called school was inspired as a result of direct contact with Nature herself," we are told. Harris and MacDonald's seminal visit to an exhibition of Scandinavian painting showing in Buffalo is later mentioned, without any indication that such an event could have in stark fact mediated that "direct contact with

Nature."³³ Whatever attention Housser, himself a Theosophist, gained for the Group, his assertion that its strength lay in the absence of coherent thought seems disquieting to us now. To define a school of artistic representation according to its thirst for Theosophist aspiration rather than for the application of specific principles leaves us with an artless, photographic concept of painting:

There is no trace of an intellectual philosophy, nor of a theory of esthetics; no preaching on life, no effort to impress or improve, or lift you up, or cast you down, but just pure "being" as through northern nature were speaking to you through a perfectly attuned and seasoned medium (119).

Lawren Harris' Theosophical beliefs led him to painterly practices that reduced the landscapes he painted to near-abstract formations within a corresponding palette presenting those shapes in a guise no naked eye has ever beheld. Whatever one's critical response to these paintings of an idealized North, they follow as night follows day the ideological prescriptions laid down in Housser's endorsement of the Group for its concern for spirit rather than attention to detail. The prominence given such works as Harris's later paintings within our matrix of national imagery, their inclusion in every Canadian art calendar testifies as how steady remains Mackenzie King's connections with later acts of national dreaming.³⁴ That connection, first

³² Lionel Stevenson, "Manifesto for a National Literature." 1924. *Canadian Bookman* (Jan. 1924): 203-08. *Towards a Canadian Literature: Essays, Editorials and Manifestoes, Vol. 1, 1752-1940*. Ed. Douglas M. Daymond and Leslie G. Monkman. 207.

³³ F.B. Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement. The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1926), 24, 65).

³⁴ Even as I write, a full-page newspaper ad concerning a forthcoming exhibition at the Dulwich Gal-

riveted when Mackenzie King crammed a federal civil servant into the Round Table, but King's adroit blurring of the boundary between Canadian actuality and a kind of vaporous para-reality would not conclude with the Galahad statue. Another of King's bestowals of knighthood makes this clear.

An 1893 commentary on Tennyson's *Idylls* urged its readers to study not only the medieval legends about Galahad, but to peruse the material concerning Parsifal (the slow-witted Sir Percivale in Tennyson) as well.³⁵ A similar interest led Mackenzie King to move from the *Idylls* to Wagner's mystical opera, *Parsifal*. Not only does his diary frequently refer to the work, but King made three pilgrimages in March, 1921, in 1922 and in April 1927 in order to watch it performed at New York's Metropolitan Opera, the second of these in the company of his mother (Diary, March 25-26, 1921; April 11, 1927). At that time and later, *Parsifal* was often performed near Easter, when its religiosity and Eastertide setting gave it a religious significance for its audiences. Robert Keyserlingk's brilliant article on Mackenzie King's spiritualism discloses that in June of 1939 as war with Germany loomed, King found himself graced with the revelation that

Adolf Hitler could be viewed as Wagner's Parsifal.³⁶ A gift book about Wagner that King rediscovered at that time supplied him with the insight that Hitler's current bellicose stance—so contradictory to the peace-loving Fuhrer that King had encountered in 1937—could be explained in a Wagnerian fashion, with an emphasis on the serenely instinctual knight, Parsifal. Under Mother's spiritual guidance from the Beyond, King came to understand that “Parsifal would again be associated with Munich” (Diary July 23, 1939).³⁷ Hitler's Wagnerian redemption never came about, except perhaps in reverse with the *Götterdämmerung* he brought upon himself and his many victims. Fortunately, Canada's significance in world affairs was sufficiently petty to render King's grotesque misreading of Hitler inconsequential in the real world. King's transformation of Hitler into Parsifal indicates however, just how deeply the idea of knighthood, the Round Table and the modern-day recurrence of its gallant sirs had penetrated into King's imaginative and spiritual matrix. The imaginative act that had elevated a heroic civil servant closed with the attribution of heroic grandeur to a monster. Imaginative knighthood had become a chancier business by June 1939.

lery in London, *Painting Canada: Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven* has no Tom Thomson painting for its lead image. Instead, Harris' near-schematic “Sketch for Isolation Peak” occupies the ad's centre: *Globe and Mail*, 9 July 2011, R11.

³⁵ G.C. Macaulay ed., *The Holy Grail by Lord Tennyson* (London: Macmillan, 1893), xi.

³⁶ Robert Keyserlingk, “Mackenzie King's Spiritualism and His View of Hitler,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 20:4 (Winter '85-'86), 34.

³⁷ Poetic license allowed King to conflate Bayreuth (where the opera had been first performed) with Munich, the site at once of Hitler's disastrous attempted coup in 1923 and of his greatest diplomatic triumph 15 years later.

Bert Harper as Sir Galahad did serve as the opening to Mackenzie King's career as a shaper of public memory through memorial statuary, an enterprise more concerned with local and historical, rather than mythical modeling. The inflation of Grandfather (William Lyon Mackenzie) into a primal role in the development of colonial self-rule within the British Commonwealth may have been an egregious "spinning" of the historical record, but the Mackenzie memorial at Toronto's Queen's Park stands as another political statement among the many found there.³⁸ Thanks to its position atop a lengthy plinth, the bust of the "Little Rebel" looms taller there than he did in real life. His windswept hairdo is

far more compelling than the cheap wig that he actually wore. All this is cosmetic however, rather than mythical. Mackenzie King never returned to a mythic configuration after the Harper memorial, but that project did set him on a course of public memorializing that continued throughout his life, from the artificial ruins at Kingsmere to his untiring support for Walter Allward's Vimy memorial during the lengthy delays to its completion, to his penning of the captions for the bas-reliefs on the Niagara Pioneer Arch, to Toronto's Mackenzie Memorial. What stands at the intersection of Metcalf and Wellington Streets in Ottawa marks the opening moment in Mackenzie King's quest for the Grail of public memory.

³⁸ Dennis Duffy, "The Sideways March: Mackenzie King's Monumental Quest, 1893-1940" *Ontario History*, 100:2 (Autumn 2008) 130-49 discusses this monument and its role in King's ancestral quest.